DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 296 537 EC 210 306

AUTHOR Lais, Greg; Smith, Tom
TITLE Bringing People Together in the Wilderness: Conjoint Adventure Trips for Special Populations.
PUB DATE Mar 88
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children (66th, Washington, DC, March 28-April 1, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Adults; *Adventure Education; Camping; Daily Living Skills; *Disabilities; *Intergenerational Programs; Interpersonal Communication; *Interpersonal Competence; Labeling (of Persons); *Normalization (Handicapped); Outdoor Activities; Self Esteem; Sexual Abuse; Socialization; Stereotypes

ABSTRACT

The article describes a 5-day winter camping expedition experienced conjointly by two groups: one a blend of able-bodied and physically disabled adults, and the second consisting of sexually exploited adolescents who were placed in a group home setting. The first group were members of Wilderness Inquiry II, a community based adventure program that integrates disabled with nondisabled persons, while the second, Fresh Start, is a special living and learning placement for youth who have been sexually abused. Goals of the conjoint adventure included increasing socialization and communication skills, enhancing self-esteem, developing independent living skills among the disabled participants, and reducing negative stereotypes among the able-bodied. Psychological as well as physical preparations for the camping trip are described, as well as specific successes and problems associated with the 5-day expedition. Activities such as crosscountry skiing, snowshoe treks, and night hikes were supplemented by small group sharing, journal writing, and community interaction activities. (JW)

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# Bringing People Together in the Wilderness: Conjoint Adventure Trips for Special Populations

Greg Lais, Director
Wilderness Inquiry, II
Minneapolis, Minnesota

and

Tom Smith, Psychologist
Fresh Start School
Eagle River, Wisconsin

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EC 210306

# BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER IN THE WILDERNESS: CONJOINT ADVENTURE TRIPS FOR SPECIAL POPULATIONS.

GREG LAIS, DIRECTOR
WILDERNESS INQUIRY, II
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

and

TOM SMITH, PSYCHOLOGIST
FRESH START SCHOOL
EAGLE RIVER, WISCONSIN

DACTS*: In late February of 1986, two special population adventure groups joined together for a five day winter camping expedition on the Gunflint Trail of Northern Minnesota, near the Canadian Border. The total party of about 36 people lodged at basecamp Camp Menogyn on frozen Bearskin Lake, and then tapped into the sub-zero winter wonderland of the northwoods. There was crosscountry skiing, snowshoe treks, overnighters in handmade snow shelters, dogsledding, nighthikes, and end-of-day sauna and icey dips through the 16" thick ice of Bearskin. There were times for small group sharing, private journaling, and total community interactional "bear hunts" and "people to people" initiatives.

Perhaps, in terms of the learnings, the growth, and the sheer excitement of it all, this special "access to winter" trip was not that different from that of many other groups/schools that spend some time at winter outdoor adventure. However, in terms of the composition of the community, there was a special uniqueness. One of the groups was a blend of disabled and able-bodied adults, as sponsored by Wilderness Inquiry, II, of Minneapolis; and the other group was from the Fresh Start Program of Eagle River, Wisconsin, a special living and learning placement for sexually exploited youth.

The purpose of this interview/discussion paper is to summarize some of the philosophy, programatic highlights, and special problems involved in such a conjoint adventure. Let's start with a brief overview to the two programs.

GREG LAIS: Wilderness Inquiry, II (WI II) is a community based adventure program that integrates people with physical, cognitive, or emotional disabilities with non-disabled people. Since 1978, WI II has conducted hundreds of extended wilderness adventures from

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Maine to Alaska; most activities take place in the Quetico-Superior Canoe Country in northeastern Minnesota and Ontario.

WI II's program goals include increasing socialization and communication skills for all clients, as well as providing them with some very unique opportunities to enhance self-esteem. Special attention is placed on developing independent living skills among the disabled people served, and a reduction of negative and/or condescending sterotypes held by non-disabled people toward those with disabilities.

TOM SMITH: The Fresh Start Program is a special living and learning placement for youth who have been sexually abused and/or exploited. There are two group home "teaching families" on grounds of a northern Wisconsin camp. There is a home for boys, and a home for girls, with age range of 13-18. The homes are operated by the Maryville Academy of Des Plaines, Illinois; the youth are placed by the State of Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. The Fresh Start School is a special education program serving the two homes. Fresh Start is operated by the Northwest Suburban Special Education Organization of Palatine, Illinois. In addition to the special foster family homes, and the special education curriculum, Fresh Start offers a sequential and complex "outdoor adventure" or "outdoor therapy" program. The goal of the adventure program is to enhance each youth's awareness of self, others, environment, the self-other interdependency, and the self-environment interdependency.

DACTS: How did you come to consider a conjoint adventure trip for such diverse groups?

GREG LAIS: Throughout its history, WI II has made effort to include people with diverse backgrounds and social/physical conditions. Some of the most beneficial interactions we've seen are between people with physical disabilities and troubled youth. Although their personal circumstances may be quite different, both groups are usually looking for the same thing —acceptance. In a wilderness setting, far from the other trappings of civilization, people do seem to open up and

accept each other more readily. This is especially true when they must rely on each other to survive. In this context, a conjoint trip between WI II and the Fresh Start School is a natural outgrowth of the goal of integration. Besides, anyone who has worked with Tom Smith befores know it is great fun.

TOM SMITH: One of our stated goals at Fresh Start is to have the students learn more about other people. We sometimes seek out other groups for interaction, and have even had an overnight camping interaction and initiative games session with foreign exchange students. Even before the Fresh Start Program began in late summer of 1985, I had talked with Greg Lais about a conjoint trip. We were both aware that pairing a group of disabled adults and a group of problemed teenagers would be a challenge, but we had discussed the possibilities in the early months of 1985.

I had a personal interest in exploring the interaction between troubled youth and the disabled, as I have had so many personally rewarding involvements with both of these special populations. An emotionally problemed youth often seems to find a special sensitivity to other specials. Over the past twenty-five years, as I have guided personal growth groups to the boundary waters, I have often included a heterogeneous mix of adults and youth, disabled and able-bodied, professionals and clients, experienced and novice.

DACTS: In preparation for this special "Access to Winter" trip, were there any special considerations?

TOM SMITH: Our schedule provides for a monthly challenge/adventure trip, with the weeks between back at school. Much of our academic curriculum, and our continual group processing procedures, is designed as preparation for, and follow-up to, the adventure trips. In this case there were five areas of curriculum overlap to the adventure:

(1) In our P.E. program we emphasized crosscountry skiing, including the loading and hauling of equipment sleds. We even constructed our own "people sled" (pulk) to practice helping some disabled folks along the trail.

(2) In our Social Studies discussions we talked about the historic explorations of the North Pole, especially

travel by dogsleds. We sought to energize our youth by following the news of the timely unfolding of the Steger/Shurke Polar Expedition.

(3) In our Health/Science classes we talked about various patterns of physical disability and mobility impairment. We sought to teach about the characteristics of the group we would be traveling with, and as we neared time for the trip Greg provided me with some general information on the disabilities of those who would be with the WI II group.

(4) In our "adventure group" sessions we taught about cold weather protection and survival, and we introduced data on hypothermia, frostbite, dehydration, and other cold weather dangers.

(5) Finally, in our psychological counseling groups we focused on the youth's attitudes about disability. We compared physical limitations with emotional/social problems, and we sought to guide youth toward greater understanding of the individual personness of each and every human being.

Overall, there was a great amount of special preparation for the trip. We tried to prepare our students for their potential role as assistants in moving the disabled along the trails of our journey. Finally, as always, I prepared a special structured journal for our youth; throughout the adventure we require that they write impressions periodically.

GREG LAIS: WI II makes special effort to prepare people for the adventures. There are, of course, many details to attend to (equipment, dietary considerations, communication limitations, etc.), and these are communicated via correspondences which is a part of the regular registration process. Then, prior to bringing the folks together for the trip, there may be an orientation meeting; but since many of our clients are from out of town the orientation meeting may be on the evening of departure.

Perhaps the more significant preparations are the psychological ones. Throughout the literature about WI II, and throughout the interviewing contacts, we stress that our goal is integration through recreation. People are encouraged to think about their attitudes toward their perceived limitations, toward people with differing abilities, and about other issues that may be confronted in participation. Our bottom line is that we ask people to come to the adventure trip

with an open mind and a willingness to try.

For this particular trip we made an effort to prepare the WI II participants for the troubled youth, but in retrospect we could have done a more thorough job of preparing them for the wide range of possible interactions with the Fresh Start teenagers. However, we did not want to unnecessarily color the WI II participants attitudes by dragging out all of the "what ifs".

DACTS: What were the highlights of the trip as you recall them, as your staff recalls them, and as your clients reported them?

TOM SMITH: For me personally, the whole "Access to Winter" adventure was a highlight of our first year of the Fresh Start School. On the arrival day the WI II folks were a bit late, so our group had already helped the Camp Menogyn staff move a 400 pound sled of food over the trails to the lodge. As darkness moved in, some of our youth skied back across the lake and through the woods to help the WI II group haul in gear and clients. I can still sense those early moments of "community" when everyone was safely inside the big lodge at the camp.

There were moments of shared initiative games, after dinner songs and stories, and moments of freetime interactions. There were special lessons about dogsledding, snowsheltering, and cold weather first aid. There were so many special moments, as when a 15-year-old former child prostitute was "talking" with a quadreplegic CP who had only a "language board" for communication. Back in the men's cabin there were those joyful moments when a mentally retarded adult shook late sleeping teenagers out of their sleeping bags. My memories go on and on, as there were so many highlights.

After the trip was over, and we had returned to school, some of the students wrote letters to their WI II "friends." In her journal, one of our girls wrote of a special learning, "that everyone is just another one."

Our staff reported the highlight as the all day five-mile trek to the Canadian Border. Thirty-five people, traveling together, with skis, snowshoes, pulk-sleds, and dogsleds, for a picnic lunch atop a

snow covered hill overlooking Canada. As one of our teachers noted, "that day was filled with more blue sky and winter sunshine than the senses can handle —and there was equal intensity up from the insides."

GREG LAIS: The beauty of the wilderness is always a highlight, but beyond that I agree with Tom that the interactions between this diverse group of people was most beneficial. To get an idea of the diversity in participants, we had one woman who had never seen snow before, a cognitively disabled man who had never had a vacation in his life, and a woman who traveled with her post-heart attack father. When you added the Fresh Start youth, boys and girls, blacks and whites, this whole trip was truely integrated — even by WI II standards.

The WI II staff and participants reported on the high quality of interactions between the kids and the disabled folks. Everyone pitched in and cooperated to get done whatever needed to be done. It was reassuring to see that these people who came from such different backgrounds could get over their differences and share the experience.

DACTS: What did you discover to be special problems for such a conjoint adventure trip?

TOM SMITH: We ventured forward to learn, and I would be the first to admit that there were some problems with the trip — and thereby some significant learnings. First of all, there was an internal problem for the Fresh Start group. We made the mistake of having two new students accompany us on the trip. They hadn't been in our program for the extensive pre-trip orientation, and simply were not of attitude and readiness for the trip. They had not yet "connected" to our Fresh Start group. Problems came on the second day of the winter camping, as they choose to test behavioral guidelines and stay "out of area" in the cold night. Partly because of that violation of our behavioral management system, and partly because their lack of knowledge about cold weather (which resulted in near hypothermia and near frostbite), we "evacuated" those youth from the adventure sequence. As they had already had some interactions with the WI II folks, their departure was noted and not really understood.

This points up a problem that became even more obvious on the last day of the trip. Our youth were behaviorally quite appropriate throughout the trip, and I suspect that the WI II folks perceived them as pretty typical teenagers. Thus, when on the final evening before departure one of our boys had an emotional upheaval and an outburst of rage (he was a victim of exploitation by child pornographers, and had deepseated anger within), the WI II folks were awestruck and confused. As we had to help the youth regain control by a "therapeutic restraint" procedure, some of the WI II clients were notably upset. They simply were not prepared for a situation of that sort.

GREG LAIS: The most significant complaint that I heard from the WI II clients involved that incident within the Fresh Start group on that last night. The WI II folks were definitely not prepared for that, especially in the moment it occurred. They were in the middle of an emotional "wrap-up" session, and one participant was reading a special poem he had written about the whole experience. Then "KABOOM." As disturbing as the incident was, I don't know that much could have been done preventively.

This relates to my point about how much to disclose about other participants or other groups in pretrip teaching. That is a gray area in integrated adventure programing. Sometimes, passing on information can do more damage than good, causing other participants to retreat into their stereotypical perceptions of that other special population group. I've seen this happen with people who have history of seizures, or those who are mentally ill, cognitively disabled, or who have cerebral palsy. It could obviously happen with troubled youth, or any other special population — they could be judged and rejected before other participants ever meet them. The flip side of this issue is that some information which should be passed on is not, and then there is trouble because of it.

TOM SMITH: It may be that some "general" information about the group could have been shared in advance without prejudicing the WI II folks about the kids. Still, there could have been lots of talk about

possible situations, or what Greg calls "what ifs", and then the developing problem was totally different from anything discussed in advance. I guess that the problems impact on the WI II group could have been minimized if there had been time to process the whole happening conjointly. We would certainly have done that if the incident had not occurred on that final night.

GREG LAIS: I agree. The groups simply did not have time to work their reactions and feelings through. It happened late at night, and we all went home in the morning. With more time to work things out we could have diminished the impact of that incident on the group.

This brings up another significant problem. Wehn integrating any group of people you need the time to facilitate individual and group interactions. Collectively, this was a very large group of people, and we had a relatively short time to achieve our goals. As usual, we did not have the time to do all the things we wanted to do, and we did not have the time to process and interact as we could have. Despite these limitations, the WI II staff and clients were amazed at the level of integration that did occur. Many folks commented to me on how positive an experience the whole adventure was.

TOM SMITH: There were definite limitations of time for total group interaction. We simply did not have (did not take) as much time as we should have to build "community" and reap the profits of such. We were too busy with the excitement of the winter activities. The sense of "community" definitely did develop, but not maximally. In some ways we were two special groups simply sharing the same facility and the same activities. In child development this is called "parallel play" as opposed to co-operative interaction. In this adventure we definitely moved toward solid community interaction, and there were many good moments of total community connectedness. The hugs, handshakes, and sincere "good lucks" that were shared at departure gave evidence of a developing sense of "community". It was just too bad that everyone could not have stayed another five days to move further into that joyful sense of belongingness.

It would also have been valuable to have more time for staff to

staff interaction. As the daily activities unfolded, all staff were continually busy, and there were not enough times for meeting and planning. Greg and I had spent a bit of time in pre-trip talk, and I had a few interactions with other WI II leaders, but there was not enough time to do the detailed organization, sharing of group goals, and scheduling together.

DACTS: What would you have as recommendations for other groups that might venture into conjoint adventures for diverse special populations? Would you do things differently in any repeat of the WI II and Fresh Start pairing?

TOM SMITH: My first recommendation to others considering conjoint adventure trips for special populations would be "DO IT." Then I would proceed with some more specific recommendations.

(1) Before any special population group is ready to move to conjoint programing, they should surely have time and programing to mold themselves into a solid group. Only after a group has evolved into a special cohesiveness would they be ready to reach out to other groups for interaction.

(2) Prior to any conjoint adventure, each group should offer some "education" to their clients about the other group. It might be that the staffs of the two programs should assist each other in this basic orientation process, as each knows their own group best.

(3) Staff exchange time, for planning and working out the logistics, and for mutual goal setting, seems mandatory. There is need for sharing of program philosophy and the strategies. Be aware that there probably won't be sufficient time for such staff exchange once the trip unfolds.

(4) In the conjoint adventure it would be desirable to schedule in time for total community interactions. There should be early "icebreakers" and "groupbuilders," and as the days unfold some time for sharing interactions. Both groups may need time for processing experiences on their own, but some total community interactions should be structured into the sequence.

(5) Finally, I would suggest that conjoint adventure trips for special populations might be best if one of the groups was considered as the "home team," thereby having responsibility for hosting the whole adventure. In the case of the trip last winter, I think it would have been valuable if our Fresh Start kids had arrived at Camp

Menogyn a day or two early. This would have provided them time for exploration of resources and burning off teenage energy and excitement. Then they would have been even more ready for meeting, greeting, and interacting with the WI II folks.

GREG LAIS: I agree with those recommendations, and would add a couple more.

(6) The larger the group the more time you need to effectively integrate people with diverse needs and backgrounds. We would have increased our effectiveness if the groups had more time together. However, given the time restraints that always accompany any adventure trip, it might be that the overall group size should be limited. Since there were only five days, I think we should have limited the total group size to 15-16 participants, and maybe 4-5 staff (as opposed to about 25-26 participants and 10-11 staff). Unfortunately, under the circumstances (size of the two groups) we were not at liberty to do this — we didn't have the heart to tell someone they cound not go!

(7) Finally, when integrating people who have behavior disorders with those who do not, facilitators have to be concerned with the development of the predominant group group culture. Whichever sub-group is in the majority will usually establish the norms and values of the total group. In this context I think it might be more valuable if people with behavior disorders be integrated into other groups in small batches.

TOM SMITH: Those are good points. We could have profited from having more time, but given the time we had it might have been more valuable to be smaller. Perhaps we could even have divided the total community into two sub-communities, both diverse and integrated.

DACTS: Any closing comments?

TOM SMITH: Perhaps you can tell by my earlier comments that I think there is great psychological and educational growth potential in the conjoint special population trip. It would be nice to pair special population groups with mainstream youth. I have advocated heterogeneous groups on the challenge/adventure sequence for a long time, but the journey with WI II was very special. We ranged in age from 12-72, in mobility from agile teens to wheelchaired CP's, and

we had blacks, whites, and native American Indians in our community of travelors. We had experts in winter sports and winter survival, and some who had never been outdoors in cold weather. We has some youth who would be considered as "gifted" intellectually, and there were individuals who were mentally handicapped. We were too large a group, together for too little time, and there had been insufficient time for conjoint group goalsetting. Still, as we journeyed, this heterogeneous tribe of winter adventurers, we found some connectedness. We learned about sharing, caring, reaching out to others, laughing together and learning together. We were, most especially on that cold winter day in the sunshine by a frozen lake, as we shared our peanut butter and cheese chunks, a community of people as people ought to be.

GREG LAIS: Amen. There is great value in integrating people with diverse needs and backgrounds, and wilderness challenge experiences are an effective and inexpensive means to do it. It really does give everyone who participates a chance to know how people can be when they are at their best.

DACTS: It sounds good to me. Next time can I go along?